

Army Corps' fiercest critic takes the gavel

By Annie Snider

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[Garret Graves](#) has a message for the Army Corps of Engineers: Get serious about reform, or your time as the nation's infrastructure builder is over.

The second-term Republican congressman representing Baton Rouge and a swath of Louisiana's coastal parishes, Graves spent six years battling the Corps as Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal's coastal adviser, blasting the agency for glacial project timelines, busted budgets and rigid adherence to legal interpretations that make little real-world sense.

Now he's the agency's congressional overseer.

Graves was tapped by House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman [Bill Shuster](#) (R-Pa.) to head the Water Resources and Environment subcommittee with jurisdiction over the Corps' \$5.5 billion civil works program as well as EPA's water and superfund programs. And with the White House promising a \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, Graves sees an opportunity for big changes at the agency that builds and manages the country's locks, dams, levees, ports and ecosystem restoration projects.

"I think the table's going to get flipped. The program doesn't make sense, and these aren't projects that are inconsequential — these are projects for flood protection, these are projects for the restoration of our coast and our environment, these are hurricane protection projects, these are projects to ensure our maritime supremacy and our global competitiveness — and we're missing the boat in every single category," he said in an interview at his Capitol Hill office.

Graves spent more than a decade early in his career as a congressional staffer for former Democrat-turned-Republican Rep. Billy Tauzin and former GOP Sen. David Vitter, equipping him with a wonk's vocabulary and approach to reforming the federal government's most red tape-laden agency. Among his initial priorities are changing the Corps' cost-benefit analyses for projects and shifting funding for Corps staff and overhead from individual project accounts to a separate budget line.

While the Corps may look like a backwater of the federal bureaucracy to most of America, the agency has a major impact on the lives of Graves' constituents. In coastal Louisiana, the Army Corps' operation of levees and navigation channels is as important to daily life as traffic is to residents of metro areas. And as climate change brings more powerful storms and bouts of gripping drought, the agency's role stands to become all the more important across the country.

"Garret Graves has waited his entire life for this moment, to be chairman of the water and environment subcommittee. This has been a career goal for him for many years and there's probably no one in Congress better prepared or better positioned to take this gavel," said Stephen Martinko, a former Shuster staffer now with the lobbying firm K&L Gates.

And it's not just Republicans who cheer Graves' ascension.

A range of national and local environmental groups worked with Graves during his time in the Jindal administration, where he spearheaded efforts to battle a breakneck rate of wetlands loss in coastal Louisiana. Thanks to sea level rise, the levees buttressing the Mississippi River and the oil and gas industry's destruction and erosion of coastal marshes, the state is losing a football field's worth of wetlands every hour, on average — a crisis not just for ecosystems, but also for coastal communities that rely on marshes as a buffer from storms and flooding coming off the Gulf of Mexico.

Graves is the rare Republican who acknowledges the problems posed by climate change and sea-level rise, winning him respect from some greens. While he has received a deluge of campaign contributions from oil and gas interests like Koch Industries and Exxon Mobil that are deeply invested in his state, the Environmental Defense Action Fund has also backed Graves.

"We're going to agree with the congressman on some issues and disagree on others, but we think that [he is heading in] an extremely positive direction and will offer bold leadership that we really need when looking at coastal restoration and infrastructure issues," said Elizabeth Mabry, a senior policy manager for EDF's Mississippi Delta restoration campaign.

In the Jindal administration, Graves directed the consolidation of wetlands restoration and flood protection work that had been spread among state agencies into a single government entity called the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. Graves ran that authority, and he played a crucial role in winning unanimous support from the legislature and business community for its \$50 billion master plan to reverse wetlands loss within half a century.

But Graves didn't do the job just by making friends. In the state's fight against coastal wetlands loss, the Army Corps was the Jindal administration's enemy of choice — a strategy that would put the federal government on the hook for much of the cost for fixing the problem. That strategy intensified after a local levee board filed a controversial lawsuit against 97 oil and gas companies seeking damages for historical destruction of wetlands.

Graves was Jindal's attack dog in the effort to kill the lawsuit and instead place blame squarely on the shoulders of the Army Corps, and he rarely missed an opportunity to criticize the Corps in front of the cameras.

"Has he been tough on the Corps of Engineers? He certainly has. Have a lot of people in the Corps of Engineers not particularly liked that? They certainly haven't," said retired Maj. Gen. Tom Sands, who commanded the Corps' Lower Mississippi Valley Division and is now a senior adviser at water resources firm Dawson & Associates.

And while Sands and others have said they're seeing Graves soften his approach now that he's shifted seats from staffer to politician, the congressman's opinion of the Corps hasn't changed.

"The Corps would walk off a cliff if that's where their manual took them," Graves said. "They get stuck in their own little myopic role with each little individual person in their process."

But he has big plans to change that. Ultimately, Graves argues that if the Corps doesn't learn to become more efficient quickly, it will cease to exist. His experience in Louisiana showed him that state and local governments can be every bit as effective at fixing water resources problems, and he

is a staunch proponent of promoting competition within government.

Even as a self-described conservative Republican, Graves sees a role for federal investment in infrastructure, but he contends that the government is going about it the wrong way. For instance, programs meant to prepare communities for natural disasters are spread across a half dozen different federal agencies and are divorced from the Corps programs designed to reduce risk in the first place.

“I think better aligning or synchronizing some of these right-now disparate efforts can be huge to improving the resiliency of our communities, improving the resiliency of our ecosystem and improving our financial situation by not repeatedly coming in and doing these multi-billion dollar disaster response packages,” he argued.

The National Flood Insurance Program offers an opportunity for better marrying up the two sides of the equation, and Graves has worked with the House Financial Services Committee, which must reauthorize the program by the end of September. But the fate of many of his nascent ideas will hinge first and foremost on how the Congressional Budget Office scores the costs — a major challenge, he acknowledges, since disaster relief spending is typically handled off budget.

At his subcommittee, Graves is looking at tweaking the way that the Corps calculates its crucial cost-benefit analyses, a complex calculation that determines the viability of projects and helps the administration prioritize them for funding. Graves argues that the current models don’t fully account for the economic consequences that a natural disaster can have on the broader economy, like when Hurricane Sandy brought New York City’s financial sector to a stand-still.

“There are financial consequences to areas being flooded and disasters occurring in certain areas. We don’t do a good job quantifying those liabilities and those costs,” he said.

Graves is already advocating for the inclusion of water resources projects in the Trump administration’s infrastructure package. But in order for the Corps to avoid being left on the sidelines as it was in the Obama administration’s stimulus bill, it’ll need to make big changes, he said.

Without reform, he says the Corps stands to be cut out altogether, with the government instead tapping other agencies and state, local and private entities for the work.

While the big decisions about the scope and scale of a massive infrastructure package will most likely be hashed out between the White House and top congressional leaders, T&I Chairman Shuster has indicated he’ll listen to the sophomore hemoved from the lower dais to the chairman’s seat. Graves’ “input and insights will play a valuable role in helping shape what policies we may include,” he said in a statement.

And despite his conservative views about the EPA side of the committee’s jurisdiction, Graves has won a welcome from the panel’s Democratic members.

“He is willing to talk. He’s not pointing fingers, he wants action, he wants to find out how to make it better, which is what we all want,” said [Grace Napolitano](#) (D-Calif.), the top Democrat on the Water Resources and Environment subcommittee.

Graves has even earned the respect of some of his former sparring partners. Retired Brig. Gen. Duke

DeLuca, who headed the Mississippi Valley Division during Graves' final year in the Jindal administration, said Graves just might be the person to deliver a much-needed shake-up to the agency, even if Congress has played a big role in tying the agency in knots in the first place.

"Underneath it all, regardless of whatever political posturing has to occur and does occur, because it's politics, at his heart Rep. Graves is a reformer and he wants to reform the Corps, not just be a fetchy client of the Corps."

Plus, DeLuca argued, he's got his own skin in the game this go-around: "He's not just a client of the [Corps'] function or an unsatisfied partner of this function, he's partly responsible for the function now."

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